

Not for publication until released by the Committee

PREPARED STATEMENT

OF

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REGARDING

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON DOD AND ITS SERVICEMEMBERS

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY
PERSONNEL**

Good afternoon, Chairman Banks and Ranking Member Kim, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the actions of the Department of the Navy (DON) to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and our efforts to transition away from mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 in response to Section 525 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2023. On January 10, 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin signed a memorandum rescinding the COVID-19 vaccine mandate for Service Members. Even before that memorandum was signed, the DON and other Military Departments were working closely with the Office of the Secretary of Defense to determine how we will continue to protect the Force and remain vigilant against contagious disease while we take steps to responsibly implement the vaccination mandate rescission.

I want to convey the following on behalf of Navy Secretary Del Toro and the senior civilian and military leadership of the Navy and Marine Corps: we are proud of our Sailors, Marines, and Civil Servants. We are proud to have led in the development, distribution, and wide-spread administration of a vaccine to fight a deadly disease that, to date, has killed over 1.1 million fellow Americans, including 18 uniformed members of the Navy and Marine Corps. We are proud of our leaders at every level who implemented and enforced the lawful COVID-19 vaccine mandate that ultimately led to 97 percent of Sailors and Marines, and 91.5 percent of DON civilians receiving the primary vaccination series. We are proud of our Marines, Sailors, and Civilians who willingly got vaccinated to reduce the risk to their teammates and families, and to ensure that our Marine Corps and Navy remained ready to support and defend our Nation and way of life. And we are especially proud of what our Sailors, Marines and Civilians did to help the Nation in

direct response to the pandemic, and all that they did to maintain the readiness of our Force despite the enormous challenges of COVID-19.

In August 2021, the Secretary of Defense mandated vaccination as a requisite for continued service as a means to address this very real and very dangerous risk to our Force. It was the right course of action at that moment based on the existential threat we faced. I continually think about the dangers we faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – thousands of Americans dying daily, normal routines interrupted, and families isolated from schools, work, and each other because of the very real need to avoid spreading a virus for which we had no protection.

Closer to the DON, I think about the extraordinary impact the pandemic had on our Fleet, severely degrading the readiness of a deployed aircraft carrier when COVID-19 rapidly spread through the crew in March through June 2020.

The USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT was conducting operations in the western Pacific Ocean when an outbreak of COVID-19 infection occurred onboard. The ship had been at sea for 13 days when three crew members presented to the medical department with symptoms. Immediately, the ship was diverted to U.S. Naval Base Guam, arriving four days after the first positive test result. Eventually, 1,331 crew members were confirmed or suspected of having COVID-19, even though the crew was predominantly young (the average age was 27 years) and was in generally good health. Among those 1,331 Sailors, 23 were hospitalized, four received intensive care, and one died.

The DON was immensely influenced by the events on the THEODORE ROOSEVELT. Unfortunately, we were forced to re-learn a

powerful lesson about the crippling nature of contagious disease in the tight confines of a Navy ship.

At nearly the same time, we learned a similar lesson about the rapid proliferation of contagious disease in the close quarters of our recruit training commands. Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island was forced to suspend shipping recruits in late March 2020 after a quick outbreak of COVID-19 infected dozens of new recruits and staff members. Our recruit training commands rapidly adjusted to smaller class sizes to enable appropriate distancing, inserted time prior to basic training for quarantine, and instituted additional mitigation measures to address apprehension on the part of many American families to send their children to basic training during the pandemic. In this difficult recruiting era we cannot afford another similar event with such dramatic impact on our ability to train new Sailors and Marines and send them to the fleet.

Safeguarding the health of a force is indispensable for the success of any campaign. Military forces are expected to respond in support of the civilian population, both nationally and internationally. Disease causes an enormous drain on the military's resources and affects both strategy and tactics. For more than half of our Nation's history, more military personnel died from infectious disease than from enemy attacks. Because of medical advances in prevention (vaccines) and treatment (antibiotics), that trend reversed during World War II.

The most effective tool against viruses is prevention through vaccination. The introduction of vaccines to prevent or mitigate the spread of COVID-19 buoyed the Nation, giving hope that this vicious disease could be defeated through vaccination. Once a vaccine was endorsed by the FDA, the Secretary of Defense determined it was in the best interest of our military to

take the measures necessary to slow, and ultimately curtail, the impact that COVID-19 had on our fighting ability. The vaccination mandate was widely well-received by the Force, as evidenced by the vast majority of Sailors, Marines, Civilians, and their families, who have been fully vaccinated.

Through the diligent efforts of our medical personnel, our doctors, nurses, physicians' assistants, medical technicians, and corpsmen, the Navy and Marine Corps carried out the lawful order to vaccinate the Force, just as we do for many other contagious illnesses. I commend leaders at every level – squad leaders, work center supervisors, senior enlisted, and officers – who dutifully enforced strict compliance with the vaccine mandate.

Not only did the majority of our Marines, Sailors, and Civilians do their duty in vaccinating to maintain their readiness – many of these same personnel deployed in their communities and across the Nation to assist civilian healthcare providers when they were needed most. Nearly 5,000 Navy Medical personnel, including many members of our Reserve Component, supported CONUS-based Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA) COVID-19 missions to increase capacity in dozens of medical facilities across the globe these last three years. The Marine Corps, expeditionary in nature, immediately formed and deployed a task force to provide command and control for Title 10 forces in the northeast region of the United States, facilitating logistical and medical supply requirements, and increasing medical capacity with U.S. Army's Urban Augmentation Medical Task Forces, a U.S. Navy Expeditionary Medical Facility, and U.S. Air Force Reserve medical personnel. Additionally, the Naval Medical Research Center and Naval Health Research Center pivoted existing capabilities to support surveillance, detection, and diagnostic responses to COVID-19. Our overseas Navy Medical Research Units mobilized research networks across

the globe to provide continuous surveillance and diagnostic support for DoD and Host Nation partners. Again, evidence of the resiliency and capability of our military.

The Secretary of Defense required full vaccination of all members and the imposition of ambitious timelines for implementation. The mandatory vaccination was subject to established medical and other exemptions. It was incumbent on each of the Services to assess how and whether to accommodate those individual personnel who objected to the vaccine. Like the other Military Departments, the DON's two Services leveraged existing policies and processes for considering a Sailor or Marine's request to be relieved from a lawful order on religious or medical grounds, while maintaining a Force in Readiness capable of defending the Nation on a moment's notice. A relatively small number of Sailors and Marines objected to the mandatory COVID-19 vaccine. Some had medical reasons, some objected for deeply held religious beliefs, and some objected for reasons of their own personal nature. 8,021 DON Service members requested a religious accommodation related to the COVID-19 vaccination requirement; 66 religious accommodations were granted. In addition, 50 DON service members were approved for a permanent medical exemption. About 5,000 Service Members refused to take the vaccine without making any request for exemption or accommodation.

The DON worked diligently to inform our Sailors, Marines, and Civilians of the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines, as well as to clarify the many misunderstandings that may have existed. Through advocacy and education, 97 percent of our Sailors and Marines were fully vaccinated. In many ways, it can be said that the Department of Defense paved the way for widespread vaccination across our whole Nation,

demonstrating the effectiveness, the ability to mass distribute, and the incredible safety of these vaccines that were administered to more than two million Service Members.

Although the vaccine mandate has been rescinded, we will not relax our vigilance to protect our Service Members and their families, and their mission. We will continue to make COVID-19 vaccination widely available, and we will promote and encourage our Service Members and their families to be vaccinated. Vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, have proven to be safe, effective, and life-saving. I am confident that our high vaccination percentage across the DON has both saved lives, and prevented hospitalizations across our entire Force.

The DON is focused on producing, deploying, and sustaining Naval Expeditionary Forces that will perform successfully across the globe in the range of military operations, to include in combat if necessary. The Secretary's paramount objective is to reduce whatever outside influences detract from that mission to ensure we maintain preeminence among near peer competitors. Contagious disease is, was, and will continue to be an existential threat to our fighting forces, as it has been through most major conflicts in our history. We must minimize addressable risks or we will ultimately degrade the credibility and capability of our forces.

We have learned many invaluable lessons throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will continue to incorporate those lessons into our future responses to contagious disease outbreaks. COVID-19 will likely not be the last infectious disease that threatens the readiness of our military. We need to remain prepared to do again what we did to battle COVID-19 including, if it becomes necessary, mandating these or future vaccines.

CONCLUSION

Following the Secretary of Defense's 10 January 2023 rescission memorandum, the DON has updated policy and distributed new guidance to the Navy and Marine Corps, in accordance with the law. We have ceased processing all adverse administrative actions for those Sailors or Marines still serving who have refused the COVID-19 vaccination. We are actively removing any and all adverse information specifically related to COVID-19 refusal from the records of these same Service Members who submitted an accommodation request, absent any other extenuating circumstances. As an additional proactive measure, Secretary Del Toro has directed the convening orders and precepts for all selection boards will make clear that information about a Sailor or Marine's COVID-19 vaccination status will not be considered in any boards' deliberations. Finally, we will comply with the Secretary of Defense's clear guidance on how the Department will determine where, and if, the COVID-19 vaccine will be required for certain individuals in the future.

We are confident that the Fleet remains strong and that our incredibly high vaccination levels will continue to protect our Force. We will continue to advocate for protection against all diseases where it is humanly possible. And our medical experts will continue to remain vigilant battling this disease and any other future contagious illnesses that so greatly impact our Nation. It is through this vigilance and the determined and unwavering leadership at all levels of the Navy and Marine Corps that we successfully managed the often difficult and contentious COVID-19 pandemic. We must continue to face such challenges boldly if we are to produce, deploy, and sustain Naval Expeditionary Forces that can fight and win our Nation's wars and advance the interests and values of the United States of America. Thank you.